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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 000130

SIPDIS

AF/E FOR JOEL WIEGERT, AF/RSA FOR LEARNED DEES  
DRL FOR SIMONE JOSEPH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/26/2020

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SMIG](#) [EAID](#) [ASEC](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: FIVE NGO WORKERS KIDNAPPED IN SOMALI  
REGION AND RELEASED THREE DAYS LATER

REF: 09 ADDIS ABABA 3067

Classified By: CDA John Yates for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

1. (C) According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Ethiopia, five Ethiopian employees of a British NGO were kidnapped in the Somali Regional State on January 15, by individuals claiming to be members of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), and were released on January 18. The kidnappers reportedly told the captives the kidnapping was intended to ensure previous ONLF warnings against humanitarian workers were taken seriously, and OCHA views the episode as a clear signal that the ONLF intends to broadly target humanitarian actors in the Somali region. The workers, all ethnic Somalis, evidently were not mistreated, but the kidnappers reportedly told them they would have been killed had they been "highlanders," (i.e., non-Somali Ethiopians). Kidnapping would represent a significant change in ONLF tactics, and some USAID partners active in the region accordingly do not believe the ONLF is responsible. No group has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping. Elsewhere in the Somali region, leaflets with ONLF markings have appeared that threaten the May 2010 elections. End summary.

OCHA Reports Five Humanitarian Workers Kidnapped

2. (C) Acting OCHA Chief Amy Martin (strictly protect) told PolOff five Ethiopian staff members of the British NGO Medical Emergency Relief International (Merlin) operating as a mobilQhealth team in Bargun kebele of Gode woreda (near Denan and East Imi woredas) were kidnapped by the ONLF on January 15. (Note: This is the first incident of this type in Gode woreda, which has generally been considered safe and has been visited by Mission staff in recent months. End note.) According to OCHA, the Merlin employees' vehicle was burned along with all their supplies, but no money or personal belongings were stolen. The employees reportedly were taken into the bush by their captors and were returned on January 18 to Gabias kebele of Gode woreda (also near Denan). As a result, Merlin has suspended operations in the Somali Regional State.

3. (C) According to OCHA, the kidnappers identified themselves to their captives as ONLF members. The kidnappers reportedly told them they had acted because the ONLF warnings of several weeks earlier (reftel) had not been heeded. (Note: At the time of reftel threat, OCHA believed it to be

limited to the World Food Program's (WFP) operations in the Somali region. The WFP responded to the threat by suspending operations in four zones: Fik, Warder, Degehabur, and Korahe, but not/not Gode. The regional government responded by imposing a curfew in Jijiga and dramatically increasing security around government offices. End note.) OCHA views the kidnapping as a clear sign that the ONLF is now broadly targeting humanitarian personnel rather than the UN or WFP alone. The captives told OCHA they were not mistreated but added that their captors claimed that if they had been highlanders (rather than ethnic Somalis), they would have been killed.

¶4. (C) Note: In email correspondence provided to PolOff by Acting OCHA Chief, OCHA's Somali Region office initially reported this kidnapping was "supposedly" carried out by the ONLF, and later stated the ONLF "was responsible." However, U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) partners who are active in Gode woreda question whether the captors were actually ONLF, especially given that OFDA implementing partner CHF insists the ONLF is not/not widely present in Gode. CHF and other OFDA partners are continuing operations in Gode as normal. End Note.

#### ONLF Posts Leaflets Threatening to Disrupt Elections

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¶5. (SBU) Multiple USAID sources reported that during the last week of December and first week of January, leaflets with overt ONLF markings were posted in Kebredehar warning that the ONLF planned to disrupt the May 2010 elections. The

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pamphlets stated the elections would not be legitimate, and warned voters against participating.

Comment

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¶6. (C) Over the past six months, Post has received increasing reports from humanitarian actors in the Somali Regional State that the ONLF has either directly threatened them or they have noticed a perceivable cooling in relations. Some believe the threats are designed to force the WFP and NGOs to negotiate an end to the Ethiopian government requirement that they be accompanied by Ethiopian military escorts (which the ONLF deeply resents). Others believe the threats are serious, and indicate the ONLF has shifted tactics and now considers non-Somali humanitarian actors in the same vein as non-Somali investors, whom it has fatally targeted in the past. End comment.

YATES